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THE MODERN GIRL.

BY SARAH GRAND, AUTHOR OF "THE HEAVENLY TWINS."

IN the present aspect of the Woman Question, the position of the young girl becomes an important as well as an interesting consideration. Only a limited number of people nowadays insist in their finite foolishness that all women indiscriminately should undertake the duties of motherhood. The conviction is gradually gaining ground that many amongst us are not suited for the sacred office. But allowing that marriage is the holiest and most perfect state both for men and women, in what way are our young men and maidens taught to qualify themselves for it? Take the girl first: How is she educated so as to fit her for such an onerous position? The constant effort so far has been to keep her in the most perfect ignorance of everything connected with it, and of the world which she will in turn be expected to educate her children to enter. This state of ignorance in marriageable women used to be called innocence. An innocent, according to the country people, is an idiot; and by a curious coincidence, the husbands of these ladies, in moments of exasperation, call them idiots as often as anything. The absurdity of an education designed for the preservation of their ignorance was one of the first things to strike women as strange in the ordering of their lives when they began to think for themselves. Some of the highest authorities still insist that the arrangement is a wise one; but the highest authorities err sometimes, and are also apt to be wanting in wit. It might have been expected that mothers would try to save their daughters from the cruel position in which the system of silence places them, but as a matter of fact mothers pretty generally evade the responsibility, and leave their daughters to find their own way out of the difficulty as best they can; and this, it appears, is what the modern girl is everywhere endeavoring to do.

Forced forward by impulses which are strange to herself and new to the race, she is gradually and involuntarily raising herself. But it is a slow and painful process, and how to help her is the question to which many of the large-hearted and thoughtful women of the present time give the most serious and anxious attention. They have their views, as is inevitable, but their object is the unusual one of wishing to arrive at the truth of the matter rather than to prove themselves right; hence the subject is for the moment uppermost, and discussions of it are incessant. In the club and periodicals, at the dinner-table, and on the platform, what girls were, are, will be, and should be is the constant question. It is not, however, usually viewed as a whole, but in little sections, an undue importance being attached to each in succession, because, although women generally are becoming conscious that some great change is taking place in their position, they are as yet unaware of the nature of it, and are consequently apt to settle upon some transient phase as being the change itself instead of merely an indication of change, or a temporary effect of the effervescence which inevitably accompanies it.

Common is confusion of mind, and in the general tangle cause and effect are more often confounded than not. People know that there are Christians of all kinds, yet, when it suits their argument, they will confidently assert that this one is a saint or that one is a sinner, because he is a Christian; and they are not necessarily dishonest people either, only indiscriminating. What they mistake for the outcome of Christianity is merely an effect of temperament. Views are a dish at our intellectual dinner which some of us can assimilate; we digest it and are the better for it, while it disagrees with others and upsets them. It is not the food that is at fault, however, but something wrong with the consumer. So some shriek that "wildness" is an outcome of the noble love of liberty, and others are easily convinced that some of their acquaintances are disagreeable because they approve of the suffrage for women; as if women had never been "wild" or worse before there was any talk of emancipating them, and as if there were something in the suffrage question inconsistent with a pleasing address. Impossible generalizations of this kind recur continually, and just at the present time every daughter is supposed to be having difficulties with her mother, because some daughters are not happy in themselves, or have been unfortunate in their

parents. That daughters do revolt is true, and that they are in some instances right to do so must also be conceded by those who know the circumstances, but it is evident too that they are often wrong. When they revolt it is best to ask why they have done so; instead of which they are generally told that they mustn't. This has been the mother's method from time immemorial, and the mother's mistake, as she is now finding. All things alter, and the girl alters insensibly with the rest, yet the mother at home remains unaware of the change. She expects her grown-up daughter to be ignorant of everything objectionable upon earth until she marries, but then she may be told anything without other preparation than the marriage service. The English girl may be as much the chattel of her parents nowadays as ever she was, if the parents so choose. They can order her life in its most minute details up to the last moment that she spends beneath their roof, and can then hand her over, and often do, to face disease and death as the chattel of her husband. It is from the horrors of this position that girls have to make their escape, and that not for their own ends only, but for the benefit of the whole human race. The tyrannies of parents may be terrible. Fathers frequently compel their grown-up daughters to lead an idle, useless, and irksome existence in accordance with their own prejudices, and quite irrespective of the girls' abilities, inclinations, and possible necessities, until it is too late for them to make a career for themselves, and their lives are spoilt. Clergy, doctors, and lawyers practising in country places din marriage, and nothing else, into their daughters' ears, although there are no marriageable men in the neighborhood. The latter go elsewhere for work as they grow up, but these parents argue on the old lines, apparently oblivious of the fact, as the beaver that builds its dam with the handle of a broom in a London garret is of the absence of water. But as we advance by degrees it becomes impossible to cramp the lives of mature young women in accordance with ideas that did for an older day, but that are impracticable and apt to be injurious in ours. Intelligence is active, books are plentiful, thought is free, and there are always opportunities for conversation. The girls of a family may be "like dumb driven cattle" until one of them marries, but then what the others become depends very much upon her. If she is able, energetic, and unhappy, she will take good care

that her sisters know the why and wherefore, and the result of her instruction must of necessity depend upon the kind of person marriage has made her. And besides the married sister, there are always the servants, many of them modest and high-principled women, more delicate minded than their mistresses, but many unfortunately quite the reverse. The young lady's maid who brushes her mistress's hair twice a day has ample opportunities to influence her, and does so only too often with the worst effect. The girl, like the boy, comes to an impressionable age, and is highly sensitive to the fatal fascination of a tabooed subject, and the only sensible way to educate her is to watch for this time, and then instruct her. There are usually indications of it in remarks she makes and questions she asks. It is urged by some mothers that premature knowledge of the world coarsens a girl, and makes her hard and callous. This is quite possible, but the knowledge should not be premature. Those who undertake the education of girls should be able to decide when the right time comes to impart it ; otherwise they are not fit for their office. It must be remembered that there are girls who would never get over premature revelations, while there are others with senses so precocious that they seem never to have had an age of innocence, and it is necessary to speak to these at once and plainly. Mothers must discriminate, and not shirk their duty in the matter because it is unpleasant. Girls generally know more of the world they live in than they are allowed to pretend. They learn somehow, as often involuntarily as not. But it is not what she knows that coarsens a girl—it is the way in which the knowledge has been conveyed. A communication made in a giggle by a servant has a very different effect upon character and conduct from the same thing gravely given as a lesson. And when young people are taught the facts of life, they must also be taught what to think about them. Girls brought up on this plan make the most admirable women ; it is the haphazard of the other which ends only too often in disaster.

The impulse of the elder married women just now is to keep girls from all knowledge of evil, that it may not grieve them; that of the younger is to enlighten them. This because the latter are in the acute stage of suffering from lost illusions, and they would save others that misery at all events, while the elder women have calmed down, forgotten, become blunted, or lost

hope. The last oftenest. They cannot believe that the world will ever be any better than it is, and they can think of no other way of serving the girls than by keeping them in ignorance as long as possible.

There was a charm about the old ideal of innocence which men and women of refinement are very loath to lose. If girls could be kept in perfect seclusion, only allowed to read works specially prepared for them, and married when they came to maturity to men worthy of them, then there could be little question that the preservation of what we call their innocence would be as practically right as it is poetically beautiful. But the condition of a girl's life at the present time makes the old ideal almost impossible and quite unsafe. It is almost impossible because in the confusion consequent upon a great effort to set the human household in order, much is exposed which has hitherto been hidden, and the girl can see for herself. Hers is perhaps the most difficult position of all. She may be more intelligent than her mother, and although she may not be so well educated in the true sense of the word, she is pretty certain to have acquired more general information. Her mind is probably a storehouse of disconnected facts, the object having been to cram as many as possible into it without order or arrangement, so that the chances are she cannot lay hold of anything for her guidance just when she wants it. To keep young people in ignorance is to expose them to every risk, and to let them have knowledge without teaching them how to use it is to give them a dangerous machine with which they may injure themselves for life.

The modern girl cannot help knowing that she herself is the subject of much discussion, and unless she is essentially stupid, she must have a fair idea of what a great deal of it is about. When Ellean, the innocent in "The Second Mrs. Tanqueray," confesses that she has known or suspected her step-mother's character from the first, one is not surprised. But the ignorance required of a mature young woman is not only impossible, but injurious, to her character, since it is apt to drive her into a hypocritical assumption of it. The difference of opinion on the subject places her between two stools. She would like to answer to every one's expectations, but never knows what to know and what not to know. Her father would have her grow up in absolute ignorance of the world, her

mother leans also to that ideal, but other people she meets are altogether against it. She is given the Bible, Shakespeare, and the dictionary, and is expected to overlook the objectionable facts of life which they contain and explain. If she does not do so until she is married, it is argued that she is not pure minded. But, besides such sources of information, as she comes to maturity, if she is healthy, she is conscious of inclinations and impulses which alter her whole attitude towards the other sex, and these are in no way checked by absolute silence on the subject. On the contrary, the mystery that is made of it is apt to change her involuntary interest into unwholesome curiosity, and then she will adroitly extract information from her elders unawares by affecting to know more than she does. She feels, thinks, and observes; and thought, feeling, and observation together force her to draw her own conclusions; but whether these will be sound and healthy is now a matter of chance. She may ask questions on any other subject under the sun, but on this one she is left to her natural instincts, although these may betray her into pernicious habits, and often do. She may receive a certain amount of teaching on all serious subjects but that which concerns the very reason of her being. She is expected to have the highest principles in the matter, and yet to know nothing at all about it. For the chief duty of her life she is unprepared. The inconsistencies in the whole education of a girl are both ludicrous and pathetic, and place her in a false if not a dangerous position.

It is no longer possible, even if it were desirable, to protect the modern girl, in the old acceptation of the word. What we are aiming at is to make the world a safe and pleasant place for her to live in, and it is found best to arm her with information that she may know her enemies when she meets them, and be able to protect herself—from herself as well as from her enemies. One is specially sorry for the daughters of rich, idle, and sensual mothers because they are more hoodwinked and imposed upon than girls in any other class. There are hundreds of daughters at the mercy of mothers who have no nobler ambition than to secure a good place in society for them. These girls are most sedulously “protected,” that is to say they are deprived of the safeguard of knowledge, and not for any good reason, but merely for vulgar commercial purposes. The less girls know the more easily they are influenced in their choice of husbands. These

girls are brought up, regardless of character and constitution, exclusively for the marriage market, and are exhibited like fatted fowls whose value depends upon the color and condition of their flesh. The sooner a girl in this set is married, the better her parents are pleased. They have done with the trouble of her then, and do not care much what becomes of her afterwards, so long as she keeps up appearances. These are the girls who are now beginning to revolt in numbers. Until lately only one here and there would strike out admirably for freedom and attain to the Higher Life; but just as often they become courtesans of the clique which openly airs its depravity everywhere, and makes the manners of many of the country houses an offence to the nation. Prudent mothers do not allow their daughters to go alone to these places or mix with this set except under strict surveillance; but prudence is not the rule with society mothers; position and how to secure it is their first consideration, the position which is conferred by mere money and rank. They will sit down with the lowest in the land if only he have a high-sounding title. There is nothing that brutalizes a woman like the struggle for rank, and it is heartbreaking to see how young girls are exposed, forced forward, and sacrificed to further this common and contemptible aim. Mothers of this kind are strong on the subject of what girls should not know. They play into the hands of the kind of men they meet when they play for position, and do their best to further the principal object in life of those men, the care for their own convenience. Girls with a knowledge of the world become extremely fastidious in their choice of husbands, and it is obvious that nothing could be more inconvenient both to men and mothers in a good many cases.

But well-meaning mothers, not yet out of the sycophant stage, are also afraid of what men will say. This is a survival of the days of the degradation of marriage, when it was almost the only career open to a woman as a means of livelihood. Then women had to consider what men required of them, but now they ask why they require it. Men would lose their respect for girls who knew the world, some declare; but we ask why more for girls than for married women, and find in the answer a motive that makes what they call their respect of no consequence. It is also objected that men will turn a girl's knowledge to evil account, which is very probable; but the men who do it are those who

take advantage of their ignorance for the same purpose. It would be best to save girls from having to deal with animals of this description, but as this is impossible, surely some knowledge of the kind is an absolutely necessary safeguard.

When the mother shows want of sympathy and want of comprehension with regard to the subjects that perplex the daughter, the girl is driven elsewhere with her troubles, and very often chooses an undesirable confidante ; and thus it happens that the last person a girl thinks of consulting about any interest of vital importance to herself is her own mother. No honorable person will interfere between parents and children, but how to help an unhappy girl except by doing so is frequently a question. Pressure of public opinion will have its effect in time, but meanwhile much damage is being done, much needless suffering inflicted. There is no doubt, however, that the modern girl has been caught by the rising tide of progress, and will be borne along bravely. If parents are tyrannical, if the girl finds herself one of a household of girls doomed to stagnation at home, or with marriage mapped out for her as the only alternative when marriage is distasteful ; or if she has any strong bent and finds herself prevented from pursuing it, she surely owes it as a duty to herself to seek advice on the subject, and to revolt if necessary. It is not her parents' prospects that are at stake, but her own, and the happiness of her whole life depends upon the early choice of a career suited to her constitution, taste, and abilities.

The modern girl is growing up, and "more life and fuller" is what she wants. The subject of her capacity is one that it is not possible to generalize upon. The genus girl is comprised of individuals of the most varied powers and opposite inclinations, and in order to do them justice circumstances should be made to suit this variety—circumstances, that is to say, in the way of education and opportunities for putting themselves to the test, and arriving at a proper knowledge of what they can or can not do. The way of the world has been to make a sphere of an invariable size and shape for all girls indiscriminately according to their class. If it does not fit, the girl is held to be at fault, and the educator is expected to alter her, to take her in, like a dress, if necessary rather than to enlarge her little sphere. If possible she is forced into it and kept there ; and in one case her spirit will be broken, her development checked, and her chances of

happiness lost ; in another she will outgrow it in spite of herself, but will become distorted in the effort, like cedar-trees dwarfed by Chinese gardeners to grow in flower pots. One meets specimens of this sort of mismanagement every day, the first being a weak and useless women of the kind that brings contempt upon the sex, while the second is only too often an evil influence.

“What are we to do with our girls ?” distracted parents ask incessantly. The answer is easy enough. Consider them, respect the needs of their nature, and do not require them to conform to the exigencies of the day before yesterday. Parents who would do their duty by the modern girl should recognize the fact that the average of intelligence is higher in her sex than it used to be, that observation is involuntary, and that silence may conceal thought, but does not stifle it. The reasoning faculty is there, and will work of its own accord, but probably all awry if not carefully directed. There are very few girls who will not strive after an ideal of life if only it is offered to them early. Girls are of a plastic nature. Their inclinations for the most part tend toward refining influences ; but influenced they must be, and if there is an absence of that which is noble in the shape into which they are first moulded, then that which is ignoble is apt to take its place. There is no more difficult or delicate task in education than the forming of a young girl’s character. If a well-judged touch will on the one hand produce the most beautiful results, so on the other one that is ill-judged will warp and disfigure.

The present difficulty has already resulted both in good and evil. In the first reaction from the old state of things, the chattel-girl is apt to rebel against necessary as well as unnecessary restraint, and the consequence is anything but edifying ; but at the same time there are girls growing up among us in all classes who promise to be among the finest specimens of their sex the world has ever seen in any numbers. Now and then individuals of the kind have appeared to show what women might be, but it is only in our day that the type has blossomed out into many representatives. These girls are the product of the higher education which is truly both higher and an education ; and happy is the man who secures one of them for a wife.

SARAH GRAND.